

Musical world mourns loss of Amadeus Quartet's Peter Schidlof

by Hartmut Cramer

The news of the sudden death of Peter Schidlof, the viola player in the world-famous Amadeus Quartet, comes as a particularly painful blow to the entire musical world. With his passing, not only did we lose a great artist, and perhaps the greatest violist of all time, but Schidlof's death also means the end of the Amadeus Quartet itself—this unique musical institution, which has actively shaped the greater part of postwar musical history. For, as with each of the other three members of this remarkable string ensemble, Peter Schidlof is “simply irreplaceable.”

Hans (“Peter”) Schidlof was born on July 9, 1922 in the little Austrian village of Göllersdorf, not far from Vienna. His family was Jewish, but his parents sent him to a Catholic school, and because of his musical talent, he received his first violin lessons at an early age: first from the local blacksmith, and then from the village schoolteacher. The lessons must not have been that bad, either, since even in his early school years he was already appearing in concerts, including one given for the Archbishop of Austria. But despite this, his career interests were more oriented toward those of his cousin, who was a chemist.

Hitler's invasion and *Anschluss* in March 1938, of course, changed all that. Schidlof's parents, fearing Nazi persecution, arranged an escape while it was still possible. They succeeded in placing him, along with his sister, in a “children's transport” bound for England—the only operation which would take children to the British Isles without their parents accompanying them. When he arrived in December 1938, he was carrying little more than his violin; he was put into a school, and when the war broke out shortly thereafter, at age 17 he was put in an internment camp along with so many other Jewish emigrants from Germany and Austria, who had been declared “enemy aliens.”

But despite the hardships involved, in retrospect his internment turned out to be a remarkable stroke of good luck. In one of the many camps he worked at, he first met Norbert Brainin, who became his inseparable friend, and then also Siegmund Nissel; together, these three became the founders of the Amadeus Quartet after the war. With the help of friends, they were able to arrange their release from internment camp in 1940, as “artistically valuable figures,” and took up studies in London with Max Rostal, the former student and assistant of the world-famous violin teacher Carl Flesch. Rostal, who would not accept “a single penny” for his lessons, recogniz-

ing not only the great musicality of the group, but also their considerable talent for chamber music. He educated Schidlof, Brainin, and Nissel—who, while the war lasted, had to work eight hours in munitions factories before they could devote the following four hours to violin studies—into disciplined, creative musicians.

It was thanks to Rostal's influence, and especially the fact that he also trained his students in his own chamber orchestra, that at the end of their studies, Schidlof, Brainin, and Nissel joined into a string quartet with the 'cellist Martin Lovett, whose girlfriend (and later wife) was also a student of Rostal. At first Brainin and Schidlof alternated playing violin and viola; but it soon became clear to them, that the string quartet was their most artistically engrossing activity, and so they shifted their entire efforts into that direction, especially after the success of their first “unofficial” concert on July 13, 1947 in Dartington Hall in Totnes, Devonshire. Moreover, their desire to seriously play quartets and to continuously develop themselves, could only be realized, if there were a clear division of instrumental roles.

‘Eagle-Ears’

It is a testament to the musical and personal maturity of the 25-year-old Peter Schidlof, who by then was an excellent violinist, that in this situation he decided to take over the viola part—not because that “made possible the creation of the Amadeus Quartet,” but because this would enrich the musical world with “the best viola player ever.” His numerous performances of Mozart's *Sinfonia Concertante for Violin, Viola, and Orchestra*, which he of course played with his friend Norbert Brainin, are proof of this, as is the artistic quality and technical mastery with which he handled the viola inside the string quartet itself.

It is likewise a testament to the artistic and human disposition of the four players, that on Siegmund Nissel's suggestion they used the occasion of their first official concert on Jan. 10, 1948 in the Wigmore Hall in London, to rename themselves from the “Brainin Quartet” to the “Amadeus Quartet.” What could be a better documentation that this was not to be a “normal” quartet modeled on the idea of “a soloist with three accompanists,” but rather something quite special—a quartet in which *each* of the four players had to, and *knew how* to put forward their exceptional abilities toward the best possible success of the whole: a true musical *com-*

munity, which played better as a whole, than the sum of its individual players could have ever done?

Actually, there were important artistic arguments in favor of Schidlöf's taking over the viola part. Even more than his colleagues, he possessed an excellent, unerring musical ear, which earned him the nickname "Eagle-Ears." This ability is a critical advantage for the person who plays one of the inner voices "in the middle of the quartet," who has to be able to immediately recognize and correct scarcely perceptible imperfections in the quartet's intonation. It is therefore hardly a surprise, that he was considered "irreplaceable."

In addition, with his warm, ever-beautifully singing viola tone, he played a critical role in the creation of the "Amadeus sound"—the uniquely characteristic tone-color of the Amadeus Quartet. The fact that Schidlöf played on the famous 1701 "MacDonald Stradivarius," the best-preserved Stradivarius instrument in existence, had something to do with this accomplishment; but that was not the critical difference, since "Peter can even play on a cigar-box violin and draw out the same tone-quality for which he is so famous."

The Amadeus Quartet disbands

Schidlöf died quite suddenly of a heart attack on Aug. 15, during a vacation in Sunderland, England. His unexpected death is tragic, since it leaves a gap which can never be filled: the Amadeus Quartet has ceased to exist. Indeed, this string quartet was unique: It was the summation of artistic devotion, of the creative interpretation of the great classical, Christian-humanist music, and of continual self-development.

It is not just the fact that the group was able to stay together for 40 years, but the fact that during that time, it continued to develop artistically, because all its members were committed to being "terribly honest" with each other in all their artistic discussions with each other, to permit "no compromises on fundamental questions," and to continue to weigh all arguments, until a solution had been found to the satisfaction of all four.

During these discussions, which were often difficult, sometimes bristling with polemics, yet always conducted on a high, intensely humorous and witty level, Peter Schidlöf usually kept silent, with his characteristic discretion, but he was no less engaged than the others, in reaching a unanimous agreement which ever more closely approached artistic truth. An afternoon rehearsal for one of his last concerts, on May 8 at the Music Conservatory in Cologne, West Germany, was preceded by a very intense and fruitful discussion on Schubert's last string quartet Op. 161, and later, at the performance, one could clearly perceive that even though the four musicians had already performed this quartet in public over a hundred times, this particular performance radiated an unheard-of intensity, as did also Schubert's "Rosamunde" Quartet in A minor, which they played just before the intermission. Second only to their high level of musicality, their



Peter Schidlöf

superior artistry, and their refreshingly modest humanity, it will doubtless be this faculty of the Amadeus Quartet which we will miss the most: its uncompromising honesty and faithfulness toward great classical art.

The remaining three members, Norbert Brainin, Siegmund Nissel, and Martin Lovett now plan to concentrate primarily on transmitting these faculties to their countless students and younger colleagues. The Amadeus Quartet had had grand plans: four concerts planned for this year, including a performance in the new Philharmonic Hall in Cologne; a concert tour in Taiwan, Korea, and Japan; a television program in Paris on the occasion of the group's 40th anniversary; and, of course, a great anniversary concert on Jan. 10, 1988 in London. None of this will now take place; nor will we ever hear the planned "complete cycle" of Beethoven's string quartets, which would have provided us with very interesting insights into the Amadeus Quartet's process of artistic development.

We now see the bitter revenge wrought by the refusal of the shortsighted, penny-pinching directors of the Deutsche Grammophon company to accede to the wishes of the Amadeus Quartet for a new complete Beethoven cycle, 25 years after their first such endeavor. Decca in London had finally agreed to undertake this historic recording project in record time, during the coming 12 months—a gigantic task, to which the Amadeus Quartet had assigned its highest priority. The project was begun only a few weeks ago, and two of the middle quartets, Op. 59, No. 3 and Op. 74, were recorded; they are expected to appear on the market later this year.

As difficult as it may be, we must now resign ourselves to the fact, that henceforth we will only be able to admire the unique quality of the Amadeus Quartet—a musical institution without parallel throughout the world—on recordings. Fortunately, there are many, many of these.